

The Prophetess of the Land of No-Smoke

BY MARIE MANNING

OLD Chugg had brought the stage into town one afternoon on a rocking gallop that to the initiated signified some information of importance, and, without leaving the box, had given some advance news in pantomime. He had a passenger inside—an old man with a beard like a prophet, who later went about the vicious little town affixing signs to such resorts as apparently stood most grievously in need of reformation. The notices merely stated that a prayer-meeting would be held on No-Smoke prairie on the following Thursday, and that all would be welcome. But as Chugg's pantomime had consisted of elaborate manipulation of a phantom skirt, with sundry coquettish rollings of the eye and some clerical gesticulation, it had not taken the cognoscenti long to discover that they might shortly expect a visit from the woman preacher.

Town had long heard of her—the fame of her preaching was broadcast. “When she left a settlement,” Chugg had been kind enough to add, “you wondered if she had done it alone, or if she had had any seventeen-year locusts in to help her.” So town had decided to respond to the invitation as a man—not that it felt itself as seriously in need of reformation as of amusement.

The fire and brimstone that had been hurled at it by the migratory preachers that came to No-Smoke at long intervals seldom failed to enliven the life of the range; and while no outward disrespect to the men of the jeremiads would have been permitted, their diatribes seldom failed to add to the common fund of innocent amusement. The men were willing to pay well for their entertainment, too, when the hat was passed, and, on the whole, they considered that matters between themselves and the casual shep-

herds that came to No-Smoke stood about even. And they would bid an outwardly chastened adieu to the parson and await the next camp happening—which might be vaudeville combined with the sale of patent medicine; some desperate act demanding the swift, unrelenting justice of the plains; or another preacher with his tales of fire and brimstone. On the whole, the woman preacher promised more in the way of entertainment than her brothers in judgment. And one who knew them well would have scented mischief in the men's demureness as they rode forth from town as sedate as a company of pilgrims nearing a shrine.

Spring had come slowly this year in the Land of No-Smoke. Its name, which in the original tongue stood for its great loneliness—the place where no camp-fire nor the curling smoke of tepee intruded upon the silent councils of the hills,—had of late years lost its significance. The Indians had left the land to the sun and the silence and the evil spirits that, according to their traditions, dwelt there. But the big cattle outfits had no traditions, and when they saw that the land was good for grazing they brought many herds, and the silent spaces of No-Smoke fell into the ways that were strange to it. Town sprang into being overnight. The cracked tinkle of the dance-hall piano, the clinking of glasses and spurs, laughter loud if not always mirthful, pistol-shots,—for life there was essentially a thing to be played with,—all contributed their sprightly chronicle, till at last the Land of No-Smoke became a byword for all that was unseemly. And the parsons on their way to towns of better repute hurled damnation at it and left it to its evil ways.

“I take it,” said Tom Jarvis, who was in the lead of the string of horsemen

winding their way over the old Indian trail in the direction of the prayer-meeting, "that we're nearing this yere spiritual round-up. The lady parson is even now heating her branding-irons in yonder tent. The herd"—he waved a comprehensive hand toward his companions—"will be druv to the back of the wagon, where the lady will brand it accordin' to taste. 'Rock of Ages' and the passin' of the hat—especially the passin' of the hat—will conclood the services."

Jarvis was undeniably good to look at; even men would admit it. His black, curly head easily topped the crowd that would collect at any of their foregathering-places in the hope of one of his inimitable stories. Jarvis was what was known about camp as "a tall liar," but his work was invariably artistic. His delicately aquiline profile hinted at Latin descent, and the sombrero tilted rakishly but the more closely suggested the resemblance to one of Velasquez's gentlemen. Yet Jarvis spoke the "English" of the range with perfect content, applied his knife to his food with more than a dilettante's skill, and abhorred what he would have called "dude manners." There was a cruel straightness to the lips when he laughed, and he laughed more with women than with men. It was said about town that he had a wife in Texas whom he had quarrelled with, but of this Jarvis had never spoken. He was still in the lead of the string of horsemen heading toward the prayer-meeting when Saunders spurred his pinto abreast of Jarvis's sorrel.

"The whole country seems to be takin' on about us, and now here's this preachin' woman." He spoke pettishly, as though the criticism of the community of which he was an unimportant integer were a personal affront.

Jarvis half turned in his saddle and regarded with frank amusement the chinless face with its round eyes and puffy cheeks.

"Yes," he said, with the keen enjoyment of a big boy making merry with a little one: "*The Platte Valley Lyre* in that last editorial allowed that the bark was on our manners a heap; said we had taken the cure for the water habit, till the sight of a puddle set us barkin' like a caucus of black-and-tans."

"You don't say so!" said Saunders, per-

ceptibly moved by this statement. "I'd just hate my folks to hear that."

The camp of the woman preacher was before them. The eternal flatness of the prairie was broken by the outline of a little white tent and a big uncovered wagon. A pair of lean horses close by were cropping the scant pasturage of early spring. These human appurtenances seemed small and as feebly inadequate to cope with the giant forces about them as a child's toys would have been. The old man who had affixed the notices of the prayer-meeting sat on one of the wagon shafts, sulkily whittling. His attitude toward the impending service seemed analogous to that of the compulsory host whose womenfolk have bullied him into giving a party. He contented himself with a churlish nod to the men and whittled as if whittling were the business of the day.

But with the appearance of Miriam the sanctimonious demureness of the congregation, which had not been put out of countenance in the least by the old man's lack of cordiality, now gave way to self-conscious shyness. She was so unlike the drawings they had made of her on the walls of Magee's that the sudden revelation of their shortcomings as draughtsmen had the effect of turning the tables, so to speak, and scoring a joke against themselves. She had no real claims to actual beauty—which made the almost thrilling effect of her presence the more amazing. She looked her history. All the selflessness, the long battling against sordid conditions, all the medieval mysticism, were written in that face, in the gray eyes that might have seen visions, in the mouth that would be tender even in old age. She had the look of a young sibyl whose heart is wrung that she must speak the words of sorrowful human destinies.

The men made way for her reverently. Their awkward deference had in it a shade more of awe, perhaps, than even the most beautiful woman might have taken unquestioningly as the rightful tribute of a country where the woman-famine made itself insistent at every turn. Her glance swept the throng of faces crowded close about the wagon, then came back to Tom Jarvis. Perhaps it was his general bearing, so startlingly at variance

with the rest of the group, that at first challenged her attention. His easy attitude had in it something of flattery, something of curiosity, something of personal demand. The strained attention that characterized the rest of them was in the case of Jarvis conspicuously lacking. He was frankly interested in her, but not as a possible proselyte to any scheme of salvation that she might have up her sleeve, so to speak. Again she returned his glance, and the words already pressing at her lips took flight. Something there was that seemed to speed from those half-smiling eyes beneath the tilted sombrero and bring with it confusion. For the first time since she had received "the call" to speak to these people of the wilderness she was sensible of self, of an ignoble desire to acquit herself with distinction;—the serenity of the prophetess had given place to the self-consciousness of the woman.

"God! O God!" she called, and her voice was muffled as one who calls feebly in the anguish of a dream. But the sound broke the spell; the congregation was not called to wait longer for her preaching. Miriam spoke to them from the big open wagon in which she had journeyed. On the seat was the old man, her father, his hand in his prophet's beard, looking up at her—though he lost the magic of her words in his wonder at her gift of speech. Her gaze was beyond them all—straight into the blue. The wide shining eyes gave glowing testimony of her abundant inspiration. After that first breaking of the spell the outflow of her sincerity bore her along with the force of a torrent. The grim lines relaxed in the men's faces; they looked up at her, a group of great, overgrown boys with some latent flash of the ingenuousness of childhood lighting up their russet, tanned faces.

"Our Heavenly Father," she prayed, "give me the power to speak Thy word as Thou wouldst have it spoken, lovingly and with mercy. Let these men feel through me, unworthy medium, that Thou art with them in this wilderness,—in this land of such great loneliness that savage peoples long ago called it by a name that means there is no home in all the land. And calling it thus, they left it to the suns and the snows and the silence that

were here always. And if these men, in their desolation, sometimes try to forget that there are no good women and little children who are glad of their coming—if they try to forget these things—do not let them think that Thou judgest them without understanding. False prophets have told them that Thy wrath burns as the summer sun on the desert sand, but tell them through me that it is not so. For Thy mercy, boundless as this wilderness, is with them always."

She stretched out her hands to them in quivering entreaty; the tears streamed down her face. The men were moved by them more than by the words she had spoken;—a woman had wept over them, a good woman. An inarticulate murmur ran through the group. They edged up closer to the wagon and listened like hounds with every sense abeyant.

Subconsciously she was aware of an influence drawing her gaze from the mountains, and the necessity for resisting it. Then in an unguarded moment her eyes wandered from the snows of the towering peaks to the group of faces before her, and her glance encountered the smiling eyes of Tom Jarvis. Tolerance, indulgence even, there were in that narrow look that told unmistakably he was not taking her seriously. Realizing this, there came an end to her inspiration. She was no longer the shepherdess of No-Smoke; she was only a woman who had done her best, and her best had not been found wanting in humor. She asked a blessing on their meeting and took refuge in the little white tent.

The men shook themselves like dogs that had been through deep water—all but Tom Jarvis, whose narrow eyes contracted, then he yawned. Some of the men began to talk to the old man on the wagon shaft. Miriam remained within the tent.

"Say!" said Softy Saunders, his fingers twirling a dirty dollar bill, "that was a heap fashionable sermon, but why don't they pass the hat?"

Jarvis smiled his narrow smile. "She's inside the tent looking up a deep one—the stovepipe hat that the old man wore when he run a faro-bank over in Tucson."

The men changed countenance; the fleeting boyish expression with which they had listened to her preaching gave

place to their every-day reckless look. The haggard lines came back, and there was some unseemly laughter.

"Did you see this man deal faro over in Tucson?"

"I never see his own particular bunch of features hovering over a faro-table," Jarvis admitted, "but I ain't been out in this country for ten years without pickin' up the art of readin' brands some. See an old graybeard trailin' round the country with a likely-lookin' young gal, and I'll show you a coin round-up all right. Sometimes it's singin' an' voyleen, sometimes it's faro, sometimes it's preachin', but you pay for it, no matter what's its alias."

"But if you ain't seen this identical old man and this identical gal dealin' faro, you got no call to run felonous brands on to 'em and turn 'em loose for contumely."—Softy Saunders grew two inches,—“and by your leave I think you are a liar.”

A dozen hands dragged them apart. The old man on the wagon shaft, talking ramblingly to whomever would listen, had heard no word of the dispute, but now burst into feeble cackles of senile laughter. "Let 'em scrap; let 'em scrap—ha, ha!—used to be a great scrapper myself; stopped it now, though. She"—he jerked his thumb toward the white tent—"she don't like it!" He continued to laugh feebly, looking at them from one to the other, his eyes deep in the mists of seventy odd years. "Used to do right smart o' odd jobs back home," and again the ghostly laughter. "Whitewashed Mis' Todd's fence and mended her chicken-coop all in one day—ha, ha! I tell you there was a livin' in it, but she"—and again the accusing thumb pointed toward the tent—"heard there warn't no ministers out here, and she would sell out an' come. Said what was good enough for Matthew was good enough for us. House belonged to her; her mother left it that way; an' here we be 'most ready for the poorhouse."

Jarvis looked about with a triumphant smile. "Surely, uncle, you'll let me pass the hat among the boys?"

In a twinkling the mist rolled away from the dull eyes.

"If she don't catch us—you couldn't pass no hat—but you might give me any

little thing." He looked apprehensively toward the tent. Jarvis sent his eyes up and drew his nose down, and grinned around the circle like a cow-punching Mephistopheles. Saunders had already dropped his dirty doliar in the clutching tentacles of the old man. He answered Jarvis's grimace with a wink. Several of the men followed and deposited coins or bills, according to their capacity for receiving and retaining sentimental impressions under adverse circumstances. The old man cackled feebly as he opened and shut his fist. His eyes had taken on new lustre; they glowed palely, like a candle burning behind a cob-webbed pane.

"Father! father!" The cry, full of distress, rang from the tent, and Miriam ran to the old man and opened his hand quickly, as if she were taking some hurtful spoil from a child. She turned to the men with eyes full of disappointment. "Didn't I say one word to your hearts?" She pointed to the hills against the skyline, blue on blue, till the long chain melted into the snow crests. "And I came all that way to speak to you, and this is your answer!" She crowded the money into Jarvis's hand so carelessly that some of the smaller coins rolled to the ground. "Father is old; he does not understand." With infinite tenderness she led him toward the tent; he was whimpering like a child. "Yes, yes," she soothed him, "I'll get your supper now, and you're to have the fresh eggs we got yesterday,—and I'll make the coffee strong and sweet."

"It looks mighty like the quenchers were on you, Jarvis," said one of the men, lounging up to the doubting Thomas as he tightened his cinch. Town was far away; the sun, a flaming ball, was dropping behind the western range like a round lantern caught afire.

Jarvis continued busy with his cinch, and when he looked up he seemed less sure of himself, less debonair, than they happened to remember him.

"You're right. The quenchers are on me if any one will drink with such a hound!" He flung a leg across the sorrel, and soon was one with the shadows of the foot-hills. At the fork of the road they turned to look back. Miriam had come from the white tent and begun to

gather dry sage-brush for the evening fire. They watched her crouching, moving figure, now silhouetted against the red, now lost in the shadows, as she went and came among the dry stalks of last year's rank abundance. The line of the head, the meek profile, the round throat melting into the simply gathered bodice, were all so many arguments in her favor. The eloquence of Demosthenes would not have prevailed against the solitary figure going about her homely task on the lonely prairie.

They went back to town, and not a man among them could have told what it was that had befallen him and robbed his pipe of its savor or Mr. Magee's saloon of its accustomed sorcery. They talked it over far into the night, and decided—with perhaps not more than ninety-five per cent. of self-deception—that what really ailed them was the desire of a firm purpose of amendment. They cast about for a convincingly oblique argument to detain the woman preacher among them, and a coveted salvation seemed to meet the greatest number of artistic requirements. While it was yet early morning a committee was in its saddles, flogging in the direction of No-Smoke to present a petition for a daily prayer-meeting for one week. They did not make a second mistake of offering pecuniary inducement,—but might they not bring a little game to the camp, as the country was fairly running over with things that needed killing? This to the old man, who at the suggestion seemed to strike off a spark or two of cordiality from his generally flinty demeanor.

But the prophetess would not commit herself. She had a journey to make to the north, and—her manner was gently deprecatory—she was not sure that the Lord had need of her work in the Land of No-Smoke. At which ensued such sanctimonious protestations, such crescendos and decrescendos of sighing, such rolling up of eyes and dropping of mouth corners, that had these bronzed men been in anything but a frame of mind utterly unnatural they would have been the first to laugh at themselves. The prophetess told them that she would pray for light, and if it should be made manifest that it was the

will of the Master, she would stay and pray with them daily for a week. They thanked her and returned to town. And the miracle of it was that no one laughed, not even when they were out of ear-shot from her, nor yet when they had dismounted at Magee's—dismounted there merely for the sake of habit. Trade was falling off, and the saloon-keeper, after a morning of unprecedented leisure, poured himself a solitary draught of consolation, and wondered what the town was coming to.

Jarvis joined them. He had not been one of the committee to go to No-Smoke prairie to plead with the prophetess for the prayer-meetings. Unlike the rest of them, he had not mislaid his sense of humor.

"Pass the sugar for the green-gooseberry tarts, Willy," the facetious Jarvis called to an imaginary attendant, waving his hand toward the soured-looking converts, who seemed devoid of inspiration or occupation till such time as they should return to the camp of the prophetess to hear of her decision. "Of course the lady's goin' to pull her righteous freight. A blind mule could see that you are converted straight through to the other side. 'Othello's occupation's gone,' as the gent remarked in the Cheyenne opera-house after he'd done strangling his wife." And the newly regenerate were forced to admit that the chances of further spiritual aid seemed against them.

"I move," continued Jarvis, tilting his sombrero till the white line above the tan on his forehead showed, "that this yere outfit regards me as its forlorn hope. I ain't as yet found grace, and if this here lady soul-sharp can be induced to stop over, it will be because she's convinced that I shorely am in need of it. I therefore move that I act as a committee of one lost sheep, flocks out to her camp, alone, and states the case. The chances are that she'll rather enjoy plucking me as a brand from the burning." They had to admit the plausibility of this argument. Jarvis it was who had refused to take her seriously. Jarvis presenting himself as a proselyte would not be without weight on his side of the argument. They heartily urged on him the rôle of envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the prophetess; but when

he left town, some half-hour later, on his self-imposed errand of diplomacy, they were conscious of a just indignation in seeing that he wore a pair of new overalls, and that the red silk handkerchief that sagged gracefully from his bronzed throat was the one reserved for state occasions.

The great plain of No-Smoke seemed to yearn in its utter loneliness. On three sides the hills girt it about, and from it the pale spring sunshine, like some golden vintage pouring from a broken cup, streamed down to the great stark desert beyond, that still slept the dreamless sleep of frost-bound desolation. In the uplands the wine of spring had begun to flush into life all winter-numbed things. The wind had the note of the mating bird as it sang in the bare branches of the cottonwoods, already feathery of outline; the tiny cactus leaves were shooting up from last year's shrivelled stumps, their thorns yet as harmless as the claws of a week-old kitten; the creek, full, deep-voiced, sang lustily of abundance. It gave plenty or it gave famine, as it brawled to the struggling ranch-lands below. In the spring there was human destiny in its singing. The first faint earthy smell mingled with the spice of the pines, and Jarvis breathed deeply of its fragrance.

Though the few pitiful household effects of the old man and his daughter were already packed and corded for the onward move—the call to remain not having been made clear to Miriam—she saw in the return of this solitary scoffer a manifestation that left no room to doubt the trend of duty. He had presented himself shorn of all prankishness. There was no mockery in the eyes that met hers, no trace of any cynicism in the voice that asked for help.

"Could I give it you, my brother." and again the quivering appeal of those big, kindly hands, that looked capable of so full a measure of tenderness, "could I give you the grace to see His mercy,—then indeed I would stay. But if this need of yours be to make a mock of me, to give my brothers cause for jest and laughter, then it were better that I go to those who have real need of my poor ministering." There was no anger in her voice, nor any hint of wounded

pride at his failure to take her preaching seriously; but only a gentle setting forth of things expedient.

Jarvis bent his head. "It's true, lady, I grinned last night like a wolf; but don't you know that a man 'll grin when the truth bites at his heart—grin to hide the hurt, that he may not cry like a baby or laugh like a woman?"

Again his eyes sought hers and held them captive; she wrestled blindly with the strange force in her heart, with the alien presence that had crept in like a thief in the night and laid rough hands on treasure that had seemed so secure. She turned toward the hills—serene in their strength. And all unconsciously she thought her prayer aloud: "Lord, is it I who am about to betray Thee?—To do Thy will—or my will?"

Jarvis fell back. "I'm only a black sheep," he said, "not worth saving. Them Injuns you spoke of are better worth while." The deceptive humility of the man, born of a sudden revelation of her character, carried the day. A little later he won his point and—practically—the woman; but for the moment he had been sincere.

She gently dismissed him when his errand was done, and no pretext that his nimble wits could devise could shake her resolution. But when he had gone she watched horse and rider as they climbed and dipped the trail, watched them till they were one with the blur of the skyline melting into the blue. Then she went far away from the camp, and throwing herself face downward on the earth, she prayed the frantic prayers of a woman who sees her little, every-day, familiar world blow away like sand at the coming of a storm.

Town awoke next morning to find itself conscious of heroic promptings. It wanted to vault to its saddle and ride off to knightly deeds. It did not know in the least what was the matter with it, but separately and unitedly it was in love with the woman preacher. The doors of Magee's yawned wide, but there was no coming nor going, and upon the unholy little settlement rested a Sabbath calm such as they remembered at home. The mood of town became contagious; it absorbed independent elements floating through its dingy civic channels, and

stamped them with the current infection. The fame of the woman preacher spread to the uttermost eddy of the tiny settlement; those who had not heard her were swept up and borne along on the enthusiasm of those who had. And town presented the unprecedented spectacle of animation suspended for the great event of the day—the prayer-meeting on the plain of No-Smoke.

Daily the men presented themselves humbly as pilgrims at a shrine. There was not one of them who would not cheerfully have made a crony of death for the chance of her favor, and yet there was not one who thought himself worthy to kiss the hem of her garment. Jarvis, be it said, had no share in these humilities. He thought himself worthy any favor that his vandal hand might grasp. Women were dolls to Jarvis—dolls of small consequence. For the same reason—the courage that rushes in and casteth out fear—it was Jarvis who elected to act as deputy and bring the gifts of game to the camp. During the visits he managed to establish something approaching intimacy with the old man. He led him to talk of the days when he had been a power in the politics of the corner store at home; the days before Miriam had sold their all and gone to preach in the wilderness. The old man had begun to look forward to these visits of Jarvis as agreeable intervals of secularity.

It had come to be the last day; the prayer-meeting that evening would bring the week to a close. Miriam, spent with the vigil of many wakeful nights, torn by cruel questionings, took her overburdened spirit to the silent counsel of the great plain where it gave to the valley. Her resting-place was a giant boulder enshrined in the twilight of the willow grove, which became as the judgment-seat to the woman preacher. There were stern questionings to be put by Miriam the judge, which Miriam the woman must answer. An hour passed, the inquisition lagged; the judge came down from the bench and joined hands with the prisoner in the dock, the culprit, in whom there began to grow a subdued choking suspense: "Would he come? No, he could not be coming or her heart would not drag like an anchored thing."

Then, for a moment, she saw the question clearly,—she had consented to remain because her will, fluid, unstable, had flowed into the mould of his inclination like water into a vessel. She shut her eyes and prayed for strength, and when she opened them horse and rider stood sharp against the sky-line. The wisdom of the judge, the perturbation of the woman, prompted nothing more than a mouthful of futile incongruous speeches.

He slid from his horse. There was about him the air of one who brings great treasure; youth and spring and sunshine and great strength he seemed to heap at her feet.

"I've come for my answer, Miriam." He took her hand like a flower already plucked—a flower whose fragrance had grown to be something of a matter of course. It was this imperious quality that was at the root of Jarvis's success. He rode at life full tilt, the force of victory in his very aim. There was no time for questionings. The clatter of his horse's hoofs claimed attention, and the beauty, the insolence, the precision of his aim won the day.

He brushed aside her arguments; he had not come to listen to objections, but to trample them underfoot. They loved—that was the supreme answer. What did they owe the world, their world, a handful of locoed cow-punchers,—every mother's son of whom was in love with her and lacked the wit to know it? They came snivelling after salvation,—much use they had of it in the lives they led.

Miriam received these statements as so many indictments against herself. They **had** come to hear her, then, because she was a woman,—of her ministrings there had been no need. She hung her head with the shame of it.

But Jarvis had again taken up the reel of his argument, flung it broadcast, unwound it so swiftly that her dazed perceptions could scarce follow. Her father would be happier in town. The make-shifts of the wagon life were too hard on one of his years. Leave him what money there was left, and when they should be settled in California they could send for him. Her own work should go on; it would be all the better for a little happiness. He would lend her gladly to her poor, to the sick, to

those in tribulation. She should teach him the secret of her beautiful service,—together they would do the work she loved.

For one pitilessly clear moment Miriam saw the true and the false go up and down like buckets in a well. She saw her arid journeyings over the desert, the fretful complaining of her father, the hunger, the thirst, the desolation, the little done, the undone vast. And then this man had come and held the cup of life enchantingly to her lips, the cup that she must put from her because it was unholy.

But again the man's voice was adjusting the balances, turning her little world awry by its potent sorcery. And Miriam sat on the judgment-seat, a dazed spectator at the drama of her life. "The good that's in the world when the heart is happy! It overflows, my dear, like that little singing creek bringing plenty to the ranch-lands below. I feel it in my heart, all the generous promptings that"—he laughed up at her boyishly—"that I ain't had a bowin' acquaintance with for years. Ah, my girl, the taste of life had grown sour in my mouth till I heard your voice that day on No-Smoke,—the day I grinned, Miriam—do you remember?"

She remembered that, and every moment he had been in her life from that first evening. They were silent, the shadows were growing longer, the magic of that perfect day made the gift of silent comradeship an estimable estate. No-Smoke had the quiescent delights of the land of lotus.

And presently they could hear the old man's quavering treble calling for Miriam from below.

"Father is calling." She sprang up, clutching at this forlorn hope of escape. Jarvis caught and crushed her to him:

"To-morrow morning, at sunrise, I'll have the horses ready."

She struggled for a moment, like a frantic child, then was quiet.

"To-morrow morning, at sunrise," he said, as one who impresses a lesson. And she repeated the words after him like one speaking in sleep.

No-Smoke will never forget that last prayer-meeting. They all came but Jarvis, who pleaded that he had work to do,

and—with a shrug—that he had grown a little tired of preaching petticoats; so they had ridden away without him, while the sun was yet an hour high, in all their ruffianly picturesqueness of apparel—spurs, sombreros, cartridge-belts, shaps, and silk handkerchiefs whipping the breeze, their faces as grave as if their errand had been a lynching. Miriam did not keep them long waiting. She had been ready, though it was earlier by half an hour than the time set for the service. She looked neither to the right nor left as she walked without a trace of self-consciousness to the big uncovered wagon that was to serve as a pulpit. The change that had come over her in the last twenty-four hours was startling. She was no longer the young sibyl whose heart is wrung that she must speak the sorrowful words of human destiny; she was a woman who had drained the chalice of living to its last dregs; a woman who looked at them with a face like the worn bed of a torrent. The golden quality of her voice—a yearning note that sang beneath its sweetness and would have been potent to solace souls in the pit—had fled. The prophetess in her had turned to dust and ashes. Her eyes were wide, as one who walks in sleep, her face had the pallor of death, her voice rang harsh in bitterly accusing accents:

"For I have sold Thee, my Master, for a paltrier thing than the thirty pieces, and though my hands were red I went about and made believe to do Thy work. Like Judas I have wept till mine eyes are blinded to Thy mercies, and no sound comes to mine ears but the wailing of the damned. Lift me up, O God, lest the waters of despair close over me!"

Once, twice, she swayed; then fell forward. The unconsciousness was but momentary, for again she faced them, weak of body, but not infirm of will. "Go, all of you,—you have no need of my shepherding."

It was dark on the plain of No-Smoke. The moon ploughed through a furrow of blackness, then left the ungracious night to its own dour mood. Very small and futile seemed the temporary home-making of the woman preacher on that stark, lonely plain. The woman herself lay on the piled bedquilts within the tent, and from time to time the old man looked at

her with the helpless concern of a child. They were quite alone. But presently she began to turn restlessly and, in spite of her father's protestations, to occupy herself with domestic affairs.

"Are you mad?" he called, angrily, to her, when he saw that she had caught the horses and was harnessing them to the wagon. "Are you stark mad to try to travel to-night, when you fainted, and ben making a fool of yourself in the bargain?"

"Dear father," she answered, with loving forbearance, "God is leading us away from this dreadful place. This place of temptation. Only trust Him." He watched her in silent wonder. But a little while and she had been so feeble, and now she moved and did as if there had been magic in her veins. And presently all was in readiness for the exodus. It was the sick woman who forced the initiative, who led the protesting old man to the wagon, helped

him in, put her arms about him as one would soothe an ailing child. The horses, fresh from their week's grazing, tossed their heads and sniffed the air in readiness for the journey. Eight iron-shod hoofs struck sparks from the road as they sped across the old snake trail, and presently they came to the fork of the road, and the lights of town flashed like stars in the purple west. The upper fork led to the solitary trail across the desert, across the great white plains of alkali. The lower fork dipped toward the town with its lights and human comradeship. But without a moment's hesitation the woman took the fork that led above the town—and temptation. Her father had dozed and wakened, and when they were well along the desert road and the lights of town were far behind he asked,

"Isn't it very dark on the trail, Miriam?"

"Very dark on the trail, father."